

Forging a Pan-Ethnic Identity: The Founding of the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Illinois

Robert J. Diehl

University Laboratory High School, Urbana

Teacher: Adele Suslick

When Betty Lee Sung, Class of 1948, was a student at the University of Illinois, she was among only a handful of Asian American students there. Almost sixty years later, there are approximately 4,000 Asian American students on campus. This group includes American citizens and resident aliens whose ancestry can be traced to the Asian continent and the Pacific Rim. Unlike students in the past, this group now has a program dedicated to the study of its heritage. The Asian American Studies Committee was created at the university in 1997 and developed into the Asian American Studies Program (AASP) three years later. The first director was George T. Yu, also the Director of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies. The program soon solidified its own identity, including hiring a new director, Kent Ono, and creating a variety of programs. AASP is an academic unit of the university dedicated to the research and teaching of the Asian American experiences and their cultural roots. It sponsors courses in Asian American Studies across many academic disciplines (e.g., History, Theatre, and Communications). In addition, the program offers an undergraduate degree minor and sponsors guest lectures, visiting scholars, and academic conferences. The AASP was founded because of three factors: changing student demographics, student demands, and the desire to emulate peer institutions.

Changing demographics led to a greater number of Asian Americans in Illinois and at the university, thereby stimulating demand for a university program. Historically, Illinois had few Asian Americans among its population. In 1900, there were only

120,000 people of Asian descent in the whole country according to the U. S. Census, only a small number of whom resided in Illinois. The latter were mainly groups of Vietnamese and Filipinos concentrated in Chicago. Only a relatively few Asian Americans attended the University of Illinois; as late as 1970, there were fewer than 400 Asian American students. Most Asians on campus at the time were foreign exchange students and not permanent American residents.

Changes in immigration law led to a larger number of Asian immigrants who came into the United States. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 removed restrictions on non-Western countries, leading to large increases in immigration from Asia. The Vietnam War and U.S. economic prosperity also increased the number of Asian immigrants; refugees from Vietnam and South Asia settled in Illinois and economic immigrants from Asia also sought jobs in the Chicago area. Between 1970 and 1990, there was over a 600% increase in the number of Asian Americans in the U.S. In Illinois, the number of Asian Americans increased from 40,000 to over 300,000. Immigrants were often professionals who wanted higher education for their children. These new immigrants started families and within one generation many of their children attended the leading university in the state, the University of Illinois. By 1990, there were 3,000 Asian American students enrolled.

Following from increased Asian American enrollment were student demands for an Asian American program, but these did not take shape until the 1990s. Various Asian student organizations and clubs were already on campus, some dating back to the 1930s and 1940s. Yet these were based on country of origin, and there was no overarching sense of Asian identity. Asian Americans traditionally held specific national identities

rather than pan-Asian ones, and politically they tended to act separately from one another. As a result, there were numerous different Asian American communities. Such communities had lingering animosities with one another, based on old national conflicts (e.g., Japanese-Korean). There was student activism in the 1970s, including a proposal for an AASP (Asian American Alliance, 1973), but the movement failed because of the small number of Asian American students. Asian Americans were also not seen as a minority group that merited special attention.

In the 1990s, Asian American students began to adopt a pan-ethnic identity, perhaps because they found themselves in a multicultural setting at the University of Illinois. Student leaders from a variety of Asian American backgrounds began to build coalitions and united over two issues: an AASP and a cultural center. Illinois students were similar to other Asian American students around the country who wanted such units in order to combat racial prejudice and to dispel the myth that they were a “model minority.” The few existing courses in Asian American studies were not enough to satisfy student activists and indeed only fostered more interest in formal programs. However, there were no student demonstrations calling for change. This was quite different from the founding of other ethnic studies centers at the University of Illinois and around the country. Student pressure, in the form of proposals and petitions with hundreds of signatures, led the University of Illinois to form an Asian American Studies Committee that recommended an AAS curriculum, which subsequently evolved into the AASP program.

The creation of the AASP was also a result of the university trying to emulate peer institutions. Major California universities (e.g., UCLA and UC-Berkeley) developed

such programs in the 1960s and leading Big Ten universities (e.g., Wisconsin and Michigan) began Asian American programs a decade ahead of the University of Illinois. To remain competitive in recruiting students and faculty, the university had to initiate its own program. From contact with administrators at other Big Ten universities, the university learned from their experiences. Student leaders did as well by attending conferences at universities with AASPs. The university was not alone in developing an AASP at this time; the number of American universities with such programs doubled in the 1990s.

It took many years before increased Asian American student enrollment, student activism, and the desire to follow in the footsteps of peer institutions came together at the University of Illinois to form the AASP. In contrast, the Afro-American Studies and Research Program was founded more than thirty years earlier. The same factors that led to the creation of the AASP are likely to promote its continued development. There has already been an expansion in the number of AAS courses, now numbering twenty-five. More faculty members are being hired in this area, with fifteen core AASP faculty and ten affiliated members currently on staff. AASP has submitted a proposal for an AAS undergraduate degree major, and it is also looking to create a doctoral program.

After Betty Lee Sung graduated from the University of Illinois, she became a pioneer in Asian American Studies, writing one of the first histories of Asians in the United States. Even so, she could not foresee how successful the AASP would become: “I am just flabbergasted at the extent that Asian American Studies has blossomed at Illinois.” [From “About Us,” *Asian American Studies Program*. University of Illinois. <<http://www.aasp.uiuc.edu/aboutus.html>> (Aug. 28, 2007); Asian American Alliance.

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